

# Theodicy in the *Odyssey* ... and the *Iliad*

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How do the Homeric epics address the cause of human suffering? What role do the gods play in imposing morality on men? Some have argued that the *Odyssey* marks a significant stage in the development of a 'divine justice', but here Adrian Kelly questions how sharp a distinction can really be drawn between an amoral *Iliad* and an *Odyssey* in which theodicy or divine justice reigns.

In the very first scene of the *Odyssey*, Zeus gets upset. He's angry that men blame the gods for their sufferings, and yet fail to recognize their own role in bringing those sufferings about :

*O dear, how unfair it is that  
mortals find fault with the gods.  
For they say that evils come from  
us; but they too, themselves,  
have grief beyond their portion by  
their own acts of wickedness...*  
(*Od.* 1.32–4)

Zeus immediately illustrates this state of affairs by referring to the case of Aegisthus who, despite receiving a warning from Hermes (37–43), killed Agamemnon and took his wife, Clytemnestra. This passage has been crucial to the interpretation of the *Odyssey*, with most scholars seeing it as a sign of the progression in the cultural or social attitude of 'Homer' (or the *Odyssey* poet) from the more primitive moral world of the *Iliad*.

The advance is apparently two-fold. Firstly, the gods take on the role of moral agents, warning mortals against evil actions in the *Odyssey*, when in the *Iliad* they placed their own personal interests well above objective moral principles, and seemed largely uninterested in the moral status of their favourites and enemies. Secondly, mortals in the *Odyssey* bring evil upon themselves and are punished for wrongdoing, where the *Iliad*'s rather sympathetic portrait of the Trojans and (above all) Hector seemed to suggest that the Trojans are the good guys who end up on the losing side for very little fault of their own. These two notions are the central planks of the *Odyssey*'s apparently 'new' theodicy (or system of divine justice): the gods are moving closer to the picture familiar from Hesiod's *Theogony*

and *Works and Days*, where they are enforcers of justice (*dikē*), and away from the apparently Iliadic picture of the amoral, divine freebooter.

## Self-inflicted suffering or the luck of the draw?

On the one hand, it is a tempting conclusion. Historians of literature and human culture are by nature teleological; they want to trace a progressive, developing narrative, a constant diminution of the gap between the ancients and themselves. Yet, however comforting it may be, the conclusion is not really supported by (any of) the texts, and we should abandon it. Let's begin with the question of why mortals suffer. On the one hand, both poems present misfortune as the luck of the draw. In a famous scene in the *Iliad*, Achilles ponders the issue:

*For there are two jars that lie by  
the threshold of Zeus  
of evil gifts, such as he gives, and  
the other of blessings.  
To whomever Zeus, who rejoices in  
the thunderbolt, gives a mixture,  
sometimes that man chances on  
evil, sometimes on good.  
But to whomever he gives from the  
evils, he makes him outraged,  
and evil hunger drives him over  
the shining earth,  
and he wanders honoured neither  
by gods nor mortals. (24.527–33)*

Just as Zeus did in the passage above, Achilles links the principle to the here and now, this time to the case of his father Peleus, suffering evils in old age after a blessed life. So, too, Achilles remarks, is Priam: from being once powerful and wealthy, he is reduced to watching his children killed and his city surrounded

with enemies (543–8). The point is that suffering evil is simply part of life, and not necessarily an indicator of any moral failing. This is rather close to Zeus' view in the *Odyssey*, where he spoke of men suffering 'beyond their portion' (*Od.* 1.34): evil actions add to suffering, but everyone has a portion of it. So no great change in this regard, then.

## Gods as moral enforcers

On the other hand, consider the second part of Achilles' statement (*Il.* 24.531–3), where he tells Priam that the man who gets gifts only from the jar of evils has a bad time. Though Achilles does not say it explicitly, who else but a transgressor is envisaged? The first man, who gets a mixture, is the everyman, while the second is the man whose actions seem to deserve those negative gifts. Indeed, the notion that Zeus punishes wrongdoers is explicitly stated in the famous simile of *Iliad* book 16, where the Myrmidons' effect on the Trojans is compared to a devastating spring storm sent by Zeus (386–8):

*when in anger he rages against men  
who by force give crooked judgments  
and drive out Justice, having no  
regard for the sight of the gods.*

So the idea that gods pursue wrongdoing mortals, acting as moral enforcers, is already found in the *Iliad*, and it is hardly a surprise when it turns up at the beginning of the *Odyssey*.

This returns us to the first plank of Zeus' statement of theodicy, the idea that gods try to prevent wrong by warning people, as Hermes did for Aegisthus. This can be dealt with much more quickly, for is this not precisely what Athene does at the start of the *Iliad*, when she persuades Achilles not to kill Agamemnon (1.206–14)? Achilles not only heeds the warning, but recognizes such obedience as a general principle (218) enshrined in gnomic terms:

*For he who obeys the gods, they  
particularly hear him.*

## Divine self-interest v. divine morality

What, then, is left of the ‘new’ theodicy of the *Odyssey*? Not much, I suggest. In both poems, the divine system is the same: the story gets to where it has to go, and justice is eventually done, without challenging the gods’ separate realms and powers – rather important in a polytheistic system – or their meaningful presence in the moral world of the humans.

Take, as an example, the case of Poseidon in the *Odyssey*; his enmity towards Odysseus is caused solely by the fact that the mortal had blinded his son Polyphemus and then taunted the unfortunate Cyclops with his father’s inability to heal him (9.525). This is an entirely personal motivation, and at first sight it sits rather ill with a broader system of disinterested justice, since the Cyclops avers his indifference to Zeus in stark terms, and behaves in the crucial area of hospitality (*xenia*) – over which Zeus is said to stand particular guard – as one of the worst hosts in the poem. Moreover, it is tempting to wonder just how else Odysseus should have dealt with the monster (we shall return to this question). Yet, within the boundaries of fate, Poseidon can pursue his feud against Odysseus as he wishes, exactly as the gods in the *Iliad* pursue theirs, as e.g. Hera against Troy or Apollo against Achilles.

The other side of this coin, of course, is Athene, whose actions in the *Odyssey* are also personally motivated, in this case by her favouritism for Odysseus (as one can see in their scene together at the start of book 13) but also by the consideration that he is basically a good man who is being made to suffer a condition which is beginning to look like it’s ‘beyond his portion’. This suffering is not just personally objectionable to her, but has wider ramifications: the disorder on Ithaca could destabilize the very notion of a good king, as she twice points out to Zeus (1.48–62, 5.7–17). So a god may act from a personal motive but still conceptualize that action in accordance with a wider moral consideration. That Zeus guarantees her interventions at several points in the poem reveals, as in the *Iliad*, his eventual responsibility for everything that happens on earth.

## The fate of Odysseus’ companions

This is clear in an obvious way in a particularly important test-issue for the question of Odyssean theodicy – the doom of Odysseus’ companions (*hetairoi*). They are drawn negatively in the proem, perishing ‘by their own acts of wickedness’ (*atastaliêisin Od.* 1.7), and some have seen a disjunction between that description and their eventual fate in Odysseus’ narrative: they do sometimes act sensibly,

warning Odysseus about waiting around for the Cyclops in book 9 and reminding him in book 10 of the need to resume the journey after a year’s dalliance with Circe. These are, nonetheless, exceptions, and many more and more serious are the episodes in which they behave badly – opening the bag of winds in book 10, tarrying after the raid on the Cicones in book 9, and forcing Odysseus to put in at Thrinakia in book 12. This last ends up being their final error, though even here we could defend their actions, since the slaughter of Helios’ cattle is forced on them by potential starvation. Neither Helios nor Zeus takes any account of that: all that matters is the action, for which the latter blasts their ship with the thunderbolt.

The ‘problem’ is that this seems to betray a world where the gods simply act selfishly, and are not interested in broader questions of right and wrong. This, shall we say, ‘primitivist’ conception apparently belongs back in the world of the *Iliad*; it sits ill with the progressivists we met before, and so scholars have gone to extraordinary lengths to explain the episode and its implications away, arguing that the proem is a relic of an older poem, or a later interpolation; that the *Odyssey* poet has not yet fully shaken off older ways of looking at the gods and their relationship with justice; and that the poet may even be distancing his own statement in the proem from that of his main character, who tells the story of the final destruction of the *hetairoi*.

## Warnings unheeded

Yet none of these convinces, because none is necessary. Since there is no new, progressive Odyssean theodicy whose absence needs to be explained, we should not be bothered by Helios’ personal enmity towards the *hetairoi*. But this is not primitive, so that part of the analysis is wrong as well, for there is a moral angle here which helps to make sense of the companions’ fate. After all, from Aegisthus at its opening to the suitors at its end, the *Odyssey* is careful to provide endangered individuals and groups with a series of warnings: even Odysseus himself was told by the *hetairoi* in book 9 not to stay in the Cyclops’ cave, and then once more not to anger the Cyclops by taunting him as they sailed away. He proceeds undeterred, and compounds the original error by boasting of his name and his deed, thus giving Polyphemus all he needs to invoke his father’s vengeance. So the ‘disregarded warning’ is a key signal of coming destruction, and it amounts to a very clear, almost painfully straightforward moral universe: the *hetairoi* were warned by Odysseus not to land at the island, and he had even magnified the Thracian threat, telling them that Circe

and Teiresias had told him that ‘there is the greatest danger for us’, implying that even putting into the island would be dangerous. Neither of these impressive authorities actually forbade landing, but Odysseus’ summary makes good contextual sense, given his experience of their recalcitrance.

Moreover, the *hetairoi* are not in any particular danger when they force Odysseus into landing on the island, and they are not yet starving when they choose to sacrifice the cattle. So, even without the signposted ‘disregarded warning’, their actions are unnecessary. But even if they were, they had been warned not to subject themselves to this potential danger. And they did not heed, despite the rather special sources of the warning. This does not leave Odysseus without some measure of the blame, since he falls asleep at a crucial point (just as in the bag of winds episode), and one could even criticize his general lack of control over his men in the first place. But the world is dark and full of terrors, and not the least of them are the gods. To proceed without a sensitivity to those dangers, the need to avoid and preempt them wherever possible, is a surefire way to fail. That is the order of Zeus, and the theodicy of the *Odyssey*.

There are many ways to think about the relationship between the gods and justice in early Greek epic, but neither progressivist nor primitivist approaches are convincing, because they separate the texts (and their parts) into old and new – an approach which we abandoned in the other disciplines of Homeric scholarship many years ago. While the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have different emphases and directions, both poems show a consistent theodicy which requires the gods – their interest and intervention, direct and indirect, selfish and altruistic, for favour and disfavour. Early Greek epic would be considerably poorer without them.

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